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Social Significance of Magical Realism Depicted in the Short Films of Albert Lamorisse

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Abstract:

The short films of French Filmmaker Albert Lamorisse have not just entertained the children since decades but also stunned the adults with their symbolic representation of reality which generally reflected many socio political issues of human interest. This paper will study these representations in details with core focus on his three short films: Bim, White Mane and The Red Balloon and will also try to analyse their social significance.

Keywords: Albert Lamorisse, Short films, Magical Realism & Social Significance

1. Introduction

Movies of Albert Lamorisse have entertained the children since decades with an astonishing feeling of amazement with their extraordinarily stunning narrative structures. The combination of elements of humour with a magical twist of fantasy has successfully grabbed the attention of children and touched their hearts with ecstasy. But the subject line of the short films he made for children has never been limited to the world of children with a core purpose of entertainment. On the contrary, it tried to communicate many other things which have tempted the adults to think critically about these parallel representations. The poetic narratives in his movies have always tried to throw light on many social, political and other issues of international importance. The fantastical elements have always talked about many hidden facts unnoticed by the trend setters or opinion leaders of society. The mission of these movies has always been to uncover before us, another dimension of reality and a new face of life which we are completely unaware of. His movies have not just made a mark in the history of cinema because of their philosophical appeals but also have made an attempt to critique the then society of Europe.

2. Objective

The objective of this research is to study the elements of magical realism depicted in the short films of Albert Lamorisse minutely in details. This paper is an endeavour to analyse the significance of these elements in social context.

3. Methodology

The study will focus on Lamorisse's three internationally acclaimed short films: Bim, White Mane and The Red Balloon. Content analysis method will be applied to the symbolic narratives of the three films selected for study to draw a proper conclusion.

4. A Brief Background of the Study

4.1. A Short Note on Magical Realism

Magical realism, chiefly a Latin-American narrative strategy, is characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fictions.

Although magical realism was strategically present in the literature of many cultures in many ages, the term is a relatively recent designation; it was first coined in 1940s by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier, who recognized this characteristic in Latin-American literature. Some scholars believe that magical realism is a natural outcome of postcolonial writing, which must make sense of at least two separate realities—the reality of the conquerors as well as that of the conquered. Prominent among the Latin-American magical realists are the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, the Brazilian Jorge Amado, the Argentines Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortazar, and the Chilean Isabel Allende.

Magical realism has some typical characteristics:

4.1.1. Hybridity

Magical realists incorporate many techniques that have been linked to post-colonialism, with hybridity being a primary feature. Specifically, magical realism is illustrated in the inharmonious arenas of opposites such as urban and rural and Western and

indigenous. The plots of magical realist work involve issues of borders, mixing, and change. Authors establish these plots to reveal a crucial purpose of magical realism: a more deep and true reality than the one conventional realist techniques would illustrate.

4.1.2. Plenitude

An extraordinary abundance of disorienting details. A post-colonial, multi-layered, baroque atmosphere that can cross cultural and temporal boundaries to express the layers of histories and cultures existing simultaneously and symbiotically within our lived reality often find a crucial place in the narratives of magical realism.

4.1.3. Political Critique

Magical realism contains an implicit criticism of the current power structures and discourses, the privileged elite, and established viewpoints. This is the art of the de-centered, the socially or geographically marginalized, presenting a magical “alternative world” where different subversive, even revolutionary perspectives can be voiced.

4.1.4. Authorial Reticence

Authorial reticence refers to the lack of clear opinions about the accuracy of events and the credibility of the world views expressed by the characters in the text. This technique promotes acceptance in magical realism. In magical realism, the simple act of explaining the supernatural would eradicate its position of equality regarding a person’s conventional view of reality. Because it would then be less valid, the supernatural world would be discarded as false testimony.

4.1.5. Super natural vs. Natural

In magical realism, the supernatural is not displayed as questionable. While the reader realizes that the rational and irrational are opposite and conflicting polarities, they are not disconcerted because the supernatural is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictional world.

4.2. Albert Lamorisse as a Film Maker

Albert lamorisse was a French filmmaker, film producer, and writer, who is best known for his award-winning short films which he especially made for children, and also for inventing the famous strategic board game “Risk” in 1957.

Albert Lamorisse was born in Paris in 1922. Starting his career as a photographer, Lamorisse turned to directing in the late 1940s, making short films about the fantastical and imaginative world of children. Within a short span of time he acquired an international reputation for the poetic quality of his short and medium-length films involving the fantasy world of children. Both his *White Mane* (1953) and *The Red Balloon* (1956) received a grand prize at the Cannes Film Festival; the latter also won an American Academy Award. In the early 60s he turned to feature length films with considerably less success, and then retreated to short documentaries. He was killed in a helicopter crash while shooting a documentary near Teheran. That film, *Le vent des amoureux* (1978), a visually stunning helicopter tour of Iran, was later edited from his notes and was nominated for an Oscar as best feature documentary for the Academy Award ceremonies of 1979.

Lamorisse is renowned for his poetic visual style and the childlike innocence of his storylines, but this simplicity actually hides a deeper allegorical meaning, as his films were often concerned with issues of liberty, justice, humanity and – most notably – religion. The combination of Lamorisse’s distinctive flair for aesthetics and his layered yet simple storylines earned him much acclaim from international critics early on in his career.

5. Study of His Short Films

Lamorisse, during his life time, made three short films and all the three got him an international honour and recognition.

5.1. Bim

Bim is the first short film directed by him in the year 1950. Though the film could not bag any award at any film festival or ceremony but it got him an international recognition as a short film maker.

5.1.1. Synopsis

An Arab boy, Abdullah, loves his donkey, Bim, but another boy, Massoud, who also happens to be a prince, is jealous of Abdullah and his relationship with Bim, so Massoud steals the donkey and plays mean tricks on him, such as painting him and trying to cut his ears off. Abdullah tries to rescue Bim but is caught by palace guards and is imprisoned. Realizing Abdullah's love for his donkey, Massoud becomes ashamed of his meanness and frees Bim and Abdullah. However, the donkey eats Massoud's father's lunch and is taken to a butcher. Abdullah and Massoud try to rescue Bim from the butcher, but robbers get there first and steal the donkey along with the butcher's goods. The robbers escape to the sea, and Abdullah and Massoud stage one last rescue attempt with all of their friends to try to save Bim.

5.1.2. Analysis

After its screening at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1951, André Bazin mentioned about *Bim* in *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* (no.25 of July 1953): "Together with *Crin Blanc*, *Bim* may be the only true children movie ever produced". It was because of its unusual storyline and marvelous presentation. Though the movie is categorically regarded as a true children film by the critics, it has a

symbolic meaning too. Besides narrating the story about the bond between a little boy and his donkey, the movie also tries to advocate the notion of a liberal and harmonious class less society where a boy and a donkey can easily become friends. A rich boy stretches a helping hand towards a poor boy in sympathy and promises to help him rescue his Bim, despite knowing the fact that Bim has destroyed his father's belongings.

Though the movie cannot be cited as an example of typical magical realist film, it is inspired by the categorical elements of the genre. The donkey may not be just donkey; it can be anybody with a lower status. The friendship between the rich boy and the poor boy and their together attempting to rescue the donkey brings before us an example of a united and integrated society where everyone supports each other. Escapism on the part of the robbers communicates in such kind of society no evil can prevail.

5.2. *White Mane*

It is the second short film made by him in 1953. It won numerous awards on its release, including the Short Film *Palme d'Or* Grand Prize at the Cannes Film Festival and the Prix Jean Vigo of France.

5.2.1. Synopsis

In the marshes of Camargue, France, a herd of wild horses roam free. Their leader is a handsome white-haired stallion named White Mane.

A group of ranchers capture the wild stallion and place him in a corral. Yet White Mane escapes. A boy named Folco, who lives with his fisherman grandfather, watches intently as White Mane escapes, and he dreams of one day handling White Mane. The ranchers once again try to capture White Mane and fail. Folco asks the men if he can have the white horse. Yes, says one of the men, "but first you have to catch him, but your fish will grow wings before you can manage that."

Later Folco comes across White Mane in the marshes, and he tries to rope him. However, White Mane gallops and drags Folco in the water for quite a while. Folco refuses to let go of the rope and almost passes out. White Mane relents and the two become friends.

White Mane returns to his herd and another horse challenges him for dominance. White Mane loses the fight and returns to join the boy.

The ranchers return and try to spook White Mane by setting fire to the area he and his herd live in. Folco jumps on White Mane (for the first time) and rides him bareback across the marshes of Camargue, over the sparse dunes to the sea. The ranchers give chase and surround them, but they refuse to be caught. With Folco on his back, White Mane rides into the sea. The film ends as the narrator states that White Mane took Folco to an island where horses and children can be friends forever.

5.2.2. Analysis

The film mirrors the ground reality of a capitalist as well as consumerist society, where every person is judged by his work and his occupation defines his social status. It unveils many out of sight evils of such a society and tries to advocate the notions of a humanist communism. The bond between Folco and White Mane and their escaping together to a strange and far island, crossing the sea, adds a magical touch to the narrative.

All over the film a tension between two different ideologies is visible. Rigidity of fundamentalist society clashes with the liberalist modernism. The traditional social hierarchy is also challenged openly. It brings the fact to the light that in today's world every one actually dreams of a society where everyone is equal and a bond of friendship can easily grow between two people of common interest irrespective of their caste, community and class. The social order where humanism rules and all the citizens get equal opportunities to realise their dreams.

The free movement of the wild horses is restricted by the ranchers. They try to cage White Mane, the leader of the herd and the most talented of them for their own benefit. But White Mane escapes. It clearly reflects the nature of White Mane; he is born free and cannot accept to be tamed. Dictatorship of others is not acceptable to him and he at any cost cannot give up his freedom.

Folco, the grandson of a fisherman dreams of handling White Mane. He begs the ranchers for white mane and gets a sarcastic reply, "certainly, if you can catch him, but by that time your fishes will take wings." The sequence indicates, Folco hails from a lower section of society, the community of fishermen. He is not entitled to have anything noble such as White Mane. But he manages to catch him and before his courage, adventurous nature and strength, White Mane gives in and a friendship develops between white mane and the protagonist, Folco. But the friendship faces many oppositions and challenges in society though the movie does not depict it in a very direct way but gives indications of it many times.

After White Mane's return to his herd, his dominance is challenged by another young member. It states everyone loves to live his life in his own way. No one loves to be controlled by others. The other side of the story is also presented in the movie. White Mane leaves the herd and goes to Folco. It certainly bears resemblance to the rigid nature of the fundamentalist society. The older generation does not like to be challenged by the younger ones.

The ranchers return and try to spook White Mane by setting fire to the area he and his herd live in, shows how cruel can people be. Greed and obsession may make a person go to any extent just for the fulfilment of his desires. Fosco's jumping into the fire to save White Mane gives glimpses of a true unconditional friendship. He sits on the back of White Mane for the first time and instead of his controlling White Mane, White Mane takes him to a strange island, far away from their society, the place on the lap of Mother Nature "where horses and children can be friends forever."

5.3. Red Balloon

The Red Balloon is his most notable short film made in 1956. It was awarded best original screen play at the Academy Award the following year.

5.3.1. Synopsis

The film, which has a music score but almost no dialogue, tells of Pascal, who, on his way to school one morning, discovers a large helium-filled, extremely spherical, red balloon.

As Pascal plays with his new found toy, he realizes it has a mind and will of its own. It begins to follow him wherever he goes, and not rise, at times floating outside his bedroom window, as his mother will not allow it in their apartment.

The balloon follows Pascal through the streets of Paris, and they draw inquisitive looks from adults and the envy of other children as they wander the streets. At one point it enters his classroom, causing uproar from his classmates. The noise alerts the principal, who becomes angry with him and locks him up in his office until school is over. At another, he and the balloon encounter a little girl with a blue one that also seems to have a mind of its own too, as evidenced by its act of following his.

One Sunday, the balloon is told to stay home, while Pascal and his mother go to church. However, the balloon follows them, through the open window, into the church, causing uproar, and causing Pascal and his mother being led out by the priest.

In their wanderings around the neighbourhood, Pascal and the balloon encounter a gang of bullies, who are envious of him, and temporarily steal the balloon, while Pascal is inside the bakery, however, Pascal retrieves it back, and following a chase through the narrow sidewalk alleys, they throw stones at the balloon, and they soon destroy it through the use of slingshots.

The film ends as all the other balloons in Paris come to Pascal's aid and take him on a cluster balloon ride over the city.

5.3.2. Analysis

Red balloon is perhaps the most acclaimed and talked about short film of its time. The film narrates the story of the lonely child Pascal and his friendship with a Red balloon. The emotional and caring nature of Pascal causes him to live his life in isolation as he cannot mingle with his fellow students at school. The suffocating phase of isolation finally comes to an end when he discovers the Red balloon on his way to school.

The balloon accompanies Pascal wherever he goes. It even follows whatever he instructs after he commands, "balloon you must obey me" but it does not treat any other person the same way. The reason can be made out by the audience quite easily that Pascal does not treat the balloon as merely a lifeless object or a toy. He rather looks for a true friend in it. He is not possessive about it. On the contrary, he tries to understand its feelings and desires. He cares for it exactly the way an older brother takes care of his younger siblings.

The personified balloon symbolizes many things. It can be regarded as a representative of the lower layer of society, the people, who serve us but do not get any gratitude in return. We do not give them equal status in society and refuse to give equal opportunities. But if we treat them with respect and affection, they respond in a very different manner, quite similar to the way the balloon takes care for Pascal.

It speaks about give and take relation as well. Our conducts define what we get from life in return.

The balloon watches itself in mirror, gets attracted towards another personified balloon, which makes us believe that it is female, and starts following it, makes the personification even stronger. But, no one likes the balloon's being treated as human.

Pascal's friends attack the balloon and Pascal tries his best to save it but fails to do so. The balloon falls down with a big hole in its body. When Pascal gets depressed after the tragic death of his friend, all the balloons in the city come to the road in a group, carries a procession, come to him and takes him to the sky.

The sequence reflects a very critical and common phase of society. People get envious if somebody has something noble and unusually special. They try to demolish it. The society does not react in a positive way if the traditional class hierarchy system is challenged.

After the inhuman fight between Pascal and his friends and the fall of the balloon, the other balloons of the city comes to the road and carry Pascal to the seventh sky, clearly shows, everyone has a limited patience. No matter how small is the status, anybody may raise their voice in protest against exploitation. They choose their leader, many a times; it is someone who did something for the betterment of their condition. They show their respect and gratitude this way.

Made in mid 1950s the film reflects the socio-political condition of Europe especially France in a very subtle and indirect way. The economic status of the common men and the psyche and morality of the society in aftermath of the World War II, echoes in the film quite aloud. The balloon which forces the audience to believe it is alive and symbolic representation of a common man acts as an element to show the tension between the economic classes.

The film was made at a time, when New wave in France was taking a revolutionary form with directors like Andre Bazin, Jean Luc Godard, Vittorio De sica and Roberto Rossellini making successful attempts to redefine the grammars of cinema. The common features of these two similar movements challenged the age old notions regarding cinema which revolved around beauty, vanity and fantasy and believed the major purpose of cinema was to satisfy the suppressed desires of the audience and hence a happy ending was inevitable and necessary. The movies of this period focused on the post war scenario or the consequences of the war which resulted in spread of poverty, oppression, injustice and depression. These two genres completely did away with the notion of happy ending and a well-defined and distinct conclusion. The style of open ending originated in this period. Red balloon carried the flavour.

Thou made for children; the movie tends to advocate the notion of class less society where everyone is equal. It also invokes a humanist feeling with the philosophical message "you will reap as you sow".

6. Conclusion

The short films of Albert Lamorisse, besides providing wholesome entertainment to children, attempt to critique the socio-political scenario of Europe in the aftermath of Second World War. These films deliberately focus on the effects of the war visible in the everyday struggle of common people fighting the socio economic devils such as poverty, political unrest, class struggle, disappointment and many other upheavals. Lamorisse also tries to inculcate a feeling of humanist communism amongst his viewers giving suggestions about how an ideal society should be. Since his movies are mainly meant for children, it is difficult to notice any direct advocacy of any kind of antithesis towards the dominant ideologies of society, in these movies, but, there is always an attempt to ignite the young minds for the noble purpose of improvement of the society.

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